



Hope
IS PART
OF THE
Plan



Paralyzed from the neck down by a gunshot wound in 2011, Kevin Neary C'04 can't help imagining that someday a medical miracle might allow him to walk again. In the meantime, he and his family are meeting the challenges and frustrations of his new life with strength, ingenuity, and charm to spare. **BY DAVE ZEITLIN**

With an almost unnoticeable tilt of the head, Kevin Neary C'04 directs his motorized wheelchair from the new addition to his Delaware County home into the kitchen. Two men from Delco Alarm Systems jump from their seats to make room for him to squeeze through. "Thank you, guys, for all your hard work," Kevin says, before continuing the arduous journey around the first floor of the two-story house he used to race through with his brothers.

As he gets near the front door, Kevin begins to have difficulty with the wheelchair, which he first learned to operate during his two-and-a-half-month stay at Magee Rehabilitation Hospital in Philadelphia. Although the process of controlling the chair by moving his neck muscles took a lot of practice, it was a method he far preferred to the alternative of puffing into a straw. But now the head pad on the wheelchair is loose, so he needs to call out to his father, Joseph, to fix it. Kevin still craves independence—it's what he misses most since a gunshot wound left him paralyzed below the neck—but he often needs help. His father is usually there to provide it.

Armed with a screwdriver, Joseph tightens the head pad and Kevin continues his trip around the house, passing through the dark room where he began his new life after coming home from Magee a little more than a year ago. A life-size Phillie Phanatic cardboard cutout remains on the wall but the room is mostly empty now. Kevin stayed there until the new section in the back of the house—complete with a hospital bed, his own bathroom, and a sunny den with a flatscreen TV—was finished in April. He was happy to move. The other room was also where his mother had spent some of her final days before dying of lung cancer 11 years ago.

Kevin cuts into the dining room, makes a sharp right turn, and squeezes through a narrow opening to get back into the kitchen, where the two men from Delco Alarm Systems continue to work on a video feed into Kevin's new room, which will allow Joseph—and Kevin's rotating team of nurses—to monitor him while he sleeps. Outside, Joseph is discussing plans for a deck with a local carpenter, now retired, who had volunteered his services. On the other side of the house, a couple more volunteers are working

on a new ramp that will make it easier for Kevin to get outside when he wants fresh air. Virtually the entire addition to the house was built thanks to donations and services from volunteers, some of whom didn't even know Kevin. They often had to work around the many friends and family members who have flooded the Nearys' modest house at the end of a quiet block in Upper Chichester, Pennsylvania, for the past 16 months.

"It has nothing to do with me," Joseph says of the many phone calls he gets. "They all like Kevin."

As if on cue, the doorbell rings. Michael Zamaro from Tender Care Phlebotomy has arrived to draw Kevin's blood. This is done weekly to make sure no blood clots are developing.

"What's up, Kev?"

"Hey Michael, what's going down, bud?"

The two men, roughly the same age, continue to make small talk as Michael lifts up the pair of blankets covering the body of his favorite patient and rolls up the sleeve of Kevin's button-down shirt. He's having trouble finding a vein, so he switches arms. Kevin can't feel anything.

"You got an exciting weekend ahead of you?" Kevin asks as the process drags on.

"Nah, I'll just stay home probably," Michael responds. "You go out and you either get shot or something's going to happen to you."

At first, it's unclear if Michael has remembered Kevin's situation when he says this. And for a few awkward moments, the words hang in the air. Finally, Kevin turns his head as far as his neck muscles allow and offers a pained smile.

"It happened to me on a Monday, man," he says through heavy breaths.

A Senseless Crime

On the Monday night when Kevin's life changed forever—November 14, 2011—his older brother Joe, who worked in development for Penn's athletic department and also served as cheerleading coach, had scored him a pair of tickets to the men's basketball team's home opener against Temple at the Palestra. Kevin texted one of his best friends, Tom Lione C'04, to see if he wanted to go to the game. At first Lione declined—he was at the end of his pediatrics rotation at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, and had to study for an exam—

but after about 15 minutes he decided he didn't want to waste a fun chance to hang out with a close friend and texted Kevin back to tell him he'd go. "It was this weird change of heart that I never normally have," says Tom. To this day, he says, he can't help wondering if Kevin's night might have turned out differently if he'd stuck with his original response.

The two friends stopped at Baby Blues BBQ on Sansom Street for wings and beers, then walked over to the Palestra and settled into their seats behind the basket. Joe checked in on them a couple of times during the game, and when it ended—the Quakers lost in overtime, 73-67—texted Kevin to say he was glad he was there and that he'd see him later. "I just didn't have any idea it was going to be later that night," Joe says. He, too, wonders if he could have done something different that would have prevented what was about to happen.

Tom dropped Kevin off at the corner of Third Street and Fairmount Avenue at around 10 p.m. and went home to bed. Kevin headed to his apartment, but then decided to catch the end of the *Monday Night Football* game at the King's Oak Restaurant at the Piazza at Schmidt's, the sprawling open-air plaza in the heart of the Northern Liberties section of Philadelphia. Later, after visiting a friend's house, he was walking briskly to his apartment on the 700 block of Bodine Street, following the same route he always took. "Nothing really was going through my head," he says. "The next thing you know, I'm being accosted."

Kevin didn't notice what police would later see from a surveillance camera feed: that for a couple of blocks, a 20-year-old high-school dropout named Christopher Easton was following him. Easton would tell police he decided to rob "the white guy walking down Second Street toward Brown Street" because he was bored and "had nothing to do." But after a brief exchange of words, the robbery attempt failed when Easton fled without taking anything. Instead, he shot his prey in the neck. Kevin had \$16 in his wallet. He was about 30 yards from his apartment.

When the EMTs loaded him into the ambulance a few minutes later, Kevin had two requests: to call his father and to call Union Trust Steakhouse—where he waited tables—to say he'd miss work the next day. When Kevin's dad was later told this, he

couldn't help but smile. "Here he is, almost bleeding to death, and he's worried about someone covering his shift," Joseph says. "But that's an indication of what he's like." Kevin lost consciousness on the way to Hahnemann University Hospital.

The police made a couple of calls that night to the Nearys' home phone, but Joseph and Kevin's brother Joe missed them. Joe learned about the shooting when he was awakened by a call to his cellphone from Kevin's former girlfriend, who had been given the information by Kevin's roommate. In a haze, he got dressed, packed an overnight bag, and woke up his father. Then they quickly hopped in Joe's Toyota 4Runner and sped to Philly. Only the buzz of the engine and the sound of Joseph talking into his cell phone to a detective pierced the silence of the empty highway into the city. They knew Kevin was alive but not much more.

"It didn't really hit us until we got to the hospital and we saw him" just how bad things could be, Joe says. At first, one doctor suggested that Kevin might be able to regain feeling—a "false hope" that would end up frustrating Joe—but by the time their brother Chris arrived the next morning from Washington,

where he works for US Senator Jeanne Shaheen, the family had seen the X-rays showing how the bullet had ripped through Kevin's spinal cord. They knew he would never walk again, and they soon found out he couldn't breathe without assistance, first from a ventilator and later a diaphragmatic pacemaker.

"He's not going to let this stop him from being him," Darian says. "That's one of the things that's very heartening to see. He's still going to be Kevin."



Kevin doesn't remember much from the four days he spent hooked up to tubes at Hahnemann, except that it was very dark and that a priest came to his bed to administer last rites. He also has a vague recollection of answering questions from police; even though he couldn't speak, he helped identify the suspect by nodding his head while looking through mug shots. He even managed to spell out the words "Thank you" by using a board with letters on it. According to Joseph, that only stiffened the detectives' resolve to capture Easton—which they did a few days later.

It didn't take long for Kevin's family and friends to take over the dingy ICU waiting room at Hahnemann. By the end of the same day Kevin was shot, all seven of Joseph's siblings had made it to the hospital. There were so many people there that visitors had to form a line to go into Kevin's room.

For some, it was difficult to see him heavily sedated and in a neck brace. Tom Lione remembers his wife starting to cry, only to have Kevin mouth the word "baseball" to her, perhaps his own way of trying to make her feel more comfortable. "He knew people were looking at him and they were upset," Tom says. "He hates that. He hates pity. He hates help. He doesn't want people to feel bad for him."

Another Penn classmate, Darian Alexander C'04, who drove from New York as soon as he heard what happened, also had trouble containing his emotions. He put his hand on Kevin's arm, only to realize his friend couldn't feel it. He talked to him, but Kevin couldn't say anything back. Seeing a bouquet of flowers in the waiting room set him off, and he went out to the hallway to find a spot to cry alone. But, of all people, Kevin's dad followed him—and gave him a hug. They had only met once or twice before.

"He made me feel like I was linked with him in love for Kevin, and that we were going to go through this with unity and strength and try to put on a brave face," Darian says. "I try to imagine what I would do in that situation. I'm not sure I know many people, if any, that would have been as good and adept in that situation as Kevin's father was."

The rock of the family, Joseph Neary didn't think he had any other choice.

Father and Son

When it was time for Kevin to leave Magee, a caseworker asked Joseph where his son would be going. He looked at her like she was crazy. "Where else would he go?" he remembers thinking. "Of course, he's going home."

Joseph knew it would be difficult caring for Kevin without the around-the-clock care provided by doctors and nurses at Hahnemann, Thomas Jefferson University Hospital (where Kevin underwent many surgeries from November 19 to December 9), and Magee (where he rehabbed from December 9 to February 23, 2012). But it was also something he knew he could do.

For him, the most difficult parts have involved "going through hoops" to make sure the state, through its Medicaid program, covers the things that Kevin needs, like the lift system for his bed. (Other, out-of-pocket expenses—which donations have helped Joseph to meet—have included purchasing a shower trolley, a used van for transport, and a generator for the house.) There was a small battle when an attempt was made to reduce Kevin's nursing care from 24 to 20 hours per day. Joseph argued—successfully—that that wouldn't work because Kevin has to be turned every two hours at night to prevent bedsores and has to be given medication throughout the day.

"A lot of times he gets some grief from some of the people we deal with, whether it's the nursing agency or something along those lines," Kevin says. "But he's a rock. He just does what he needs to do in order to get things done the right way and provide the best care for me."

Advocating for Kevin has become Joseph's full-time job. He used to work as an accountant for Johnson Matthey, a global chemicals company, but after the shooting he used up all of his vacation time to take off through the end of 2011, then used up all of his family-leave time. When he turned 62 last April, he was able to qualify for Social Security benefits and retire. He even received a parting gift of \$19,000 from his colleagues.

Before Kevin was shot, Joseph had other plans for his retirement—like visiting every baseball stadium in the country—but, even as he runs around the house answering phone calls and talking to retired carpenters, he always seems upbeat.

"My dad's been nothing short of incredible," says Chris, the youngest of the three Neary brothers. "He's really put his life on hold to make sure Kevin transitioned home, getting the addition done, going through all the paperwork and making sure he's getting the best care. He put on a brave face and has a positive attitude and that has translated to Kevin. He's trying to emulate my father."

Earlier this year, Kevin's brother Joe hesitated over leaving home to take a new job in development at his alma mater, the University of South Carolina. But his father gave his blessing, and Joe also knew the job opportunity would put him on a better career track and allow him to possibly return to the area down the road, when his father gets older and needs more help taking care of Kevin.

Joseph's unbreakable spirit is even more remarkable when you consider what happened to his family a decade ago. He and his wife Marian had just dropped Kevin off for his first semester at Penn in August of 2001 when they went to the doctor's office to get the X-ray results that would change the family's life for the first time. The doctor told Marian she could die in three to six months if she didn't respond to the treatment for the cancer ravaging her body. If she did, she could live up to five more years. "We ended up getting just over 15 months," Joseph says with a sigh. Shortly before she died, Marian told her husband that she felt badly because, as a nurse, she should be helping the sick patient in the next room, instead of lying in bed herself. Then she said that she regretted that she had never volunteered for Habitat for Humanity.

Joseph tried to move on as best as he could. He has a girlfriend who's very supportive. And like his son, he refuses to accept anyone's pity, quickly dismissing the idea that his family has endured more than its share of bad luck.

"It's not a function of luck," he says firmly. "You get dealt certain things and you have to make choices in terms of this is the hand you've got."

But there are difficult days. Occasionally he gets frustrated that he has to drop everything when Kevin wants to go out. He lost his composure while reading his victim-impact statement at Christopher Easton's sentencing hearing and needed

the prosecutor to finish. And, of course, he worries. There's always worry.

On a recent weekday afternoon, as he's talking about his son's condition with a visitor, he hears a thud from the room where Kevin is with one of his nurses.

"You all right?" Joseph calls out.

He doesn't get an immediate response. A concerned look spreads across his face. Would he have to rush Kevin to the hospital again? Could this be like the time he ran downstairs to see blood in the shower because Kevin's catheter was not properly pulled out? Or the time Kevin started acting loopy and rocking his wheelchair because of a urinary tract infection?

"Everything all right?" he calls out again with an increasingly alarmed tone, before getting up and walking to the door that connects the living room to Kevin's section of the house.

Just then, he hears his son call back to him.

"Hey Dad, why don't you just look on your phone?"

Kevin is referring to the video feed the Delco Alarm System guys had set up just hours earlier that allows Joseph to see into Kevin's room with his cell phone.

Letting out a hearty laugh, Joseph returns to his seat. His worried look is gone for now.

A Big Brother to Everyone

From the start, Kevin Neary's story was treated as much more than just an isolated crime story. And that's always surprised him. He says he can't figure out why there have been so many features on him in newspapers and on TV stations. Or why more than 100,000 people from nearly 50 different countries have visited the website (kevinneary.com) that his brothers created to keep friends and family updated on his progress and accept donations through a trust fund. And it's equal parts baffling and humbling why so many of those donations came from people he's never even met.

"I never really understood why it got so much publicity," Kevin says. "Why me? What makes me such a big story? Why did people want to know about me?"

Perhaps Kevin's situation has caused people to think more about gun control, urban crime, or the beneath-the-surface tension that exists in gentrifying neighborhoods. Or perhaps it's simpler than that. Perhaps, at its very core, it's a story

about how one person in one city deals with one life-changing event. What would you do if you were walking home one night, only to wake up and never be able to walk again? How would you find the will to go on when you need assistance showering, eating, and brushing your teeth? Would the anger come spilling out? What about the sadness? For many of his friends and family, it's put their own lives into a different light.

"It makes you think not only about the horrible thing that has happened," his friend Darian says, "but it makes you wonder how many times you've had a close brush with something like this and not even known it."

"I just liked walking around and doing nothing," Kevin reminisces. "You know what I mean? You just have those days when you just take in the surroundings. You just have a carefree walk. Yeah, that would be what I miss, especially in the city."

"There's no reason for him to have to go through this," adds his brother Joe, who admits to having felt "very intense anger" at times over the past year-and-a-half. "He was just walking down the street after walking someone home. That's the frustrating part. He was doing everything right. He was working hard. He was trying to make something happen—and all of a sudden someone comes and takes that away."

But Kevin is trying to handle his situation as well as he possibly can, which is probably one reason the cameras and reporters keep finding him. At Easton's sentencing hearing last September, Kevin delivered an impassioned speech to the court about how difficult his daily life has become. Then, he looked at Easton for the first time since the shooting and said he wasn't angry or bitter with him. (Later,

he'd admit he was annoyed that Easton seemed disinterested during the whole hearing, but reiterated that he doesn't "hold any animosity because he was in a certain circumstance that led him to do certain things based on certain environmental factors.") Easton, who decided to forgo a trial and plead guilty, got sentenced to 30-60 years in prison by 65-year-old judge Jeffrey Minehart, who told a *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter that Kevin's impact statement was one of the most heartbreaking things he's ever heard in his courtroom.

Those who know him best weren't surprised by how gregarious, uplifting, and generous in spirit Kevin seemed during

that difficult day in court. That's the way he's always been. When he got to Penn in 2001 after transferring from the University of Miami—"one of the best decisions I could make," he says—fellow transfers Darian and Tom immediately noticed how friendly and easygoing he was. That continued through college and after, as they all remained close friends.

During graduation week in 2004, they were celebrating at an Old City bar when Kevin decided to buy an expensive bottle of champagne. When they finished that, he bought another one. Years later, he texted Darian to come out of his Fordham law school class. Darian obliged and immediately saw Kevin, who had decided to make the trip to New York to surprise his friend for his birthday.

"He's a big brother to me but he's also a big brother to everyone he meets," says

Chris. “I think his friends from Penn will tell you that he’s always the first person to pick up the check and take care of people.”

Kevin’s gregarious nature spread to many different groups of his friends, and his boundless energy—“I used to say to people that Kevin could be asleep in the house and you’d know he was there,” his father says with a laugh—allowed him to maintain all of those close friendships. That was part of the reason he loved Philly so much: he was always around people, doing new things.

Luckily for him, the people are still around him, perhaps now in even greater numbers. The toughest part, he admits, has been losing the ability to do things on his own. His personality may have survived the gunshot wound but his independence died in the ambulance that night.

“I just liked walking around and doing nothing,” Kevin reminisces. “You know what I mean? You just have those days when you just take in the surroundings. You just have a carefree walk. Yeah, that would be what I miss, especially in the city. You just do nothing, take in the sights, sit there and see what’s going on around you, without a care in the world.”

Holding out Hope

When Kevin first regained his ability to eat solid food, he didn’t want anyone in the room to see him being fed. Now, while talking to a visitor, he gladly inhales the yogurt that’s being spoon-fed to him by his nurse, Ivo. He even dishes some friendly banter right back to him.

“You mix it up, my friend,” Kevin says when Ivo fails to properly bring the fruit to the top of the cup.

“I’m African!” Ivo shoots back. “We don’t eat this stuff!”

“You should. It’s protein!”

Kevin turns his attention to the Phillies game on his Samsung high-definition TV, with a smile on his face. “A good nurse,” he says to nobody in particular. “He just needs to work on his yogurt mixing.”

Getting used to being fed has probably turned out to be one of the easiest parts of his recovery. Losing the privacy of bathing has been far more difficult—taking a shower can sometimes be a three-man job—and getting turned every two hours at night has also had lingering effects. On the day he chides his nurse about the yogurt and watches the Phillies

play an afternoon game, he got less than two hours of sleep the night before. Sometimes, he even dreams about having a bad night of sleep.

“That’s my biggest challenge right now: my sleep issue,” he says. “People say you toss and turn. For me, I can’t toss and turn.”

Given those early touch-and-go days at the hospital, the fact that he calls not sleeping as much as he’d like his “biggest challenge right now” can certainly be viewed as a promising development. More than anything else, it’s a sign that his condition has mostly stabilized. The hardest part of being a quadriplegic is what his father calls “the gradual acceptance of the situation you’re in.” Or, as his older brother puts it, “The reality and finality of it all is settling in.”

But Kevin has shown that his new reality can still be a pretty good one, all things considered. There have been many fun benefits and lively fundraisers for him. His 30th birthday party was held at Citizens Bank Park, the home of his beloved Phillies. He went to a Philadelphia 76ers game and talked with retired NBA star Dominique Wilkins. And in the next few months, he hopes to plan more events at Philly restaurants and bars. He’ll even be in the wedding party of one of his best friends from Penn, Joel Newman C’04.

“He’s not going to let this stop him from being him,” Darian says. “That’s one of the things that’s very heartening to see. He’s still going to be Kevin.”

Thanks to an operation in March that allowed Kevin to switch from the ventilator to the less-intrusive pacer, he can now be transported more comfortably—which his father said has “made a world of difference.” It’s also helped him breathe and talk easier when friends and family come to visit him (although he still gets tired). Admittedly, there have been fewer visitors than there were in the months immediately following his injury, but those who still come regularly are often amazed at how normal Kevin tries to be, like nothing ever happened. He watches Will Ferrell movies and listens to the new Justin Timberlake album. He still communicates with friends by text messaging (someone else needs to type for him, of course) and gets “GQ’d up,” according to his dad, when girls come over. He even tries to reassure friends when he can see they’re stressed.

“Kevin was always a very calming personality,” Tom says. “And he hasn’t changed at all in that regard. His personality has stayed exactly the same.”

“That part of Kevin where he wants to take care of other people, that still comes out without fail,” adds Chris. “Even when he’s tired, which happens sometimes, he talks to people and engages with everyone. He really loves having people come by.”

There are other things Kevin wants, too. He hopes to be able to rejoin the workforce and is trying to master voice recognition software to that end. Before getting shot, he began a recruiting company called Avenue 215, but he now hopes to pursue a different field, perhaps in athletics. “Obviously I can’t play them,” he says with a smile. “I never could anyway.” On top of those career aspirations, he also hopes to perhaps start a Penn scholarship for people with spinal cord injuries and possibly return to Magee as a peer mentor.

“I really think he’s capable of a lot of really great things,” Tom says. “He just needs to do it at a difference pace than most of us, unfortunately.”

“He’s got his mouth and he’s got his brain,” Joseph adds, “so Kevin will do all right.”

Kevin has one more hope, tucked deeper away. He doesn’t talk about it as much because it might seem foolish to some. But he often thinks about one day being able to walk again. He dreams about a medical miracle.

“You’ve got to hold out hope,” he says. “I used to always think that hope is not a plan. It was one of those lines I took from one of my jobs. Now hope is kind of one of my plans. I have to live every day like that. There have got to be people working on it. There are tons of studies out there. Someone will find a way to graft this together and do x plus y and make it z. I need it. It’s frustrating to wake up every day like this.”

He pauses. His words are becoming more of a whisper now. But he pushes on, just as he’s done every day during his long and grueling recovery.

“Hope is part of my plan every day,” he finishes as his eyes begin to close and his voice fades off. ♦

Dave Zeitlin C’03 is a frequent *Gazette* contributor. Contributions on behalf of Kevin Neary may be made to the Kevin Neary Trust, Box 1824, Upper Chichester, PA 19061 or at <http://kevinneary.com/kevin-neary-trust>.